



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck and Featherstone National Wildlife Refuges

*Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan
and the Environmental Assessment*

December 2010



Bald eagle
Bill Wallen



*This blue goose, designed by
J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become
the symbol of the National Wildlife
Refuge System.*

The *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 150-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 550 national wildlife refuges and thousands of waterfowl production areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance Program which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

Comprehensive Conservation Plans provide long term guidance for management decisions and set forth goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish refuge purposes and identify the Service's best estimate of future needs. These plans detail program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning and program prioritization purposes. The plans do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.



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Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex Vision Statement

The Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex provides exceptional forest, grassland, and wetland habitats for wildlife in a dynamic, highly urbanized region of Northern Virginia. We will maintain and enhance those quality habitats along the middle tidal Potomac River for native wildlife, particularly bald eagles and other species of conservation concern.

The proximity of the Refuge Complex to our Nation's capital provides unparalleled opportunities to demonstrate the importance of the natural world in enhancing the quality of human life, and to raising public awareness about the value of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Through outreach, education, and partnerships, we will foster stewardship of the living resources of the Potomac River and relate their significance to the greater Chesapeake Bay watershed. Visitors will have diverse opportunities for quality, compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation.

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck Refuge Vision Statement

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is dedicated to the protection of the bald eagle and exemplifies the significant efforts, contributions and successes of conservationists. The refuge will continue to protect and enhance regionally important habitat for the bald eagle, migratory birds, and native wildlife and plant species. We will provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities, in particular wildlife viewing and photography. In cooperation with the other public agencies on the Mason Neck Peninsula, we will work to resolve resource issues in the area.

Featherstone Refuge Vision Statement

Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge provides valuable acres of 'wild woods and wetland' which are rapidly disappearing within this region of Northern Virginia. The refuge will continue to protect wetlands, bottomland hardwoods, and associated native wildlife and plants in an otherwise highly urbanized setting. Assuming access issues are resolved, the refuge will provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, in particular wildlife viewing, photography, and fishing.



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Summary

Type of Action: Administrative – Development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Lead Agency: U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

Location: Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge—
Fairfax County, Virginia
Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge—
Prince William County, Virginia

**Administrative
Headquarters:** Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex
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This Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and the accompanying Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzes three alternatives for managing Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck Refuge and two alternatives for managing Featherstone Refuge over the next 15 years. This document also contains six appendixes that provide additional information supporting our analysis. Following is a brief overview of each alternative.

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge

Alternative A (Current Management): Alternative A satisfies the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement of a “no action” alternative, which we define as “continuing current management.” It describes our existing management priorities and activities, and serves as a baseline for comparing and contrasting alternatives B and C.

Alternative B (Improved Management for Federal Trust Resources): Alternative B is the Service-preferred alternative. It combines the actions we believe would best achieve that refuge’s purposes, vision and goals, and respond to public issues. It would enhance our management of refuge habitats to support Federal trust resources and species of conservation concern. In particular, our priority would be to protect the refuge’s upland forests to benefit bald eagles, great blue heron, and other forest-dependent migratory birds and to protect the refuge’s marsh habitat to benefit eagles, waterfowl, waterbirds, and interjurisdictional fish. Our Mason Neck Refuge visitor service’s program would enhance compatible wildlife-dependent activities, with emphasis on wildlife observation and photography. We would improve our current trails and add new trails, observation platforms, and photography blinds. We would also offer a new youth turkey hunt, and expand our interpretive programs and outreach efforts to inform and involve more people in working towards refuge goals.

Alternative C (Enhanced Public Use Management): Alternative C would manage habitat similar to alternative A, but would expand wildlife-dependent public use programs beyond that which is proposed under either alternatives A or B. We would devote more staff time and resources to improving each of the six priority public uses. For example, we would provide additional opportunities by offering a muzzleloader deer hunting season, constructing photography blinds, and offering more guided and self-guided wildlife observation tours and environmental education programs.

Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge

Alternative A (Current Management): Alternative A satisfies the NEPA requirement of a “no action” alternative, which we define as “continuing current management.” It describes our existing management priorities and activities, and serves as a baseline for comparing and contrasting alternative B.

Alternative B (Enhanced Management): Alternative B is the Service-preferred alternative. Under alternative B, the Service would build off the wildlife and habitat actions in alternative A. Increased emphasis would be on monitoring and protecting sensitive areas from human disturbance and monitoring and controlling invasive plants, pests, and pathogens to avoid catastrophic loss or degradation of habitat. Under alternative B, the Service would continue to pursue and evaluate options with Prince William County and other stakeholders to secure public parking, and safe and legal public access to the refuge, including segment of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Once public access is secured, and we have additional staff to effectively manage a visitor program, we would provide opportunities for wildlife observation and nature photography on designated refuge trails, and fishing at designated sites. Within 5 years we would also evaluate in detail a proposal to provide hunting opportunities on the refuge.

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